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Introduction to Social Justice SJUS 1003.0

Dr. Myra Houser

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Personal Credo

Social justice as studied in this course represents a very broad concept. The nature of the course delves into several issues within society, particularly within America, that represent the injustices that people interact with every day. Social justice usually refers to the equal treatment of everyone, and equal access for all people. Personally, in response to the question “what is social justice?” I believe that the concept of social justice is the constant attention for all people to recognize unfair treatment, discrimination, and unequal distribution of resources within a community, and put forth effort to alleviate those injustices and perhaps eradicate them altogether.

To qualify this statement, I will say this: We live in an imperfect, sinful world with imperfect, sinful people. There will always be some sort of hate carried out in society by at least one person. However, this does not justify the fact that society should continuously seek out injustices and think of ways to alleviate them, as in accommodate the group receiving injustice, and eradicate the cause or the issue of the injustice. The goal of social justice is to ensure fairness, equality, and equal access to resources by all people. Although the task is daunting and will face tremendous setbacks, sometimes those that seem to great to overcome, I believe that social justice in itself is the constant progression of society to face the root issues, discover their cause, accommodate the groups affected, and find a way to eradicate the issues at hand. Is it possible for society to reach a perfect harmony? The answer is most likely no, because people

are sinful due to human nature. Romans 3:9-26 states, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” However, the Holy Bible also gives instruction for its followers to pursue justice. It is stated in Isaiah 1:17, “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” As Christians, we know that we are all imperfect, but we are still called to pursue the justice for all people.

As stated above, the call for social justice is to alleviate and eradicate issues within society, which there are several. Perhaps the largest issues regard prejudice and discrimination based on factors of race, ethnicity, income, disability, sexual identity, sexual preferences, religion, age, and others. Racism, sexism, and access to education have been some of the largest issues of social justice in recent history, such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the three waves of feminism, and the desegregation of schools within United States. Social justice is comprised of large, nation-wide issues such as these, but social justice is also called for on much smaller scales, as well as for very unpopular issues. Housing discrimination, for one, is a much smaller issue that most people are not knowledgeable about, nor care to understand. There are numerous other issues that fall into social justice but are not well known.

It is also probable that there will be social justice issues that are developed in the future that are unnoticed in modern society. There may be issues that fly under the radar to most of the population because those people are unaffected. However, my personal belief of social justice is the constant attention to societal injustices and actions towards them, therefore social justice also involves, in addition to the plethora of issues stated previously, issues that may be virtually nonexistent in modern society but those that become addressed in the future for the purpose of ensuring equal treatment and equal access to resources for all people.

Social justice combats issues that have a great deal to do with the identity of individual people and groups. In society, people are generalized based on external factors, such as the color of a person's skin, their appearance or apparent sexual identity, the model of the car they drive, or the house that a person lives in. Other factors revolve around the internal facets of an individual, such as their intelligence, core values, personality, and abilities. By human nature, individuals look at others and place them in boxes due to their external and internal factors of their identity. Humans assign characteristics and beliefs to groups of people because they have been taught to do so.

The way that society views people based on their identity has a great deal to do with social justice. Social justice calls for society to recognize how people are treated differently or unfairly based on their identities and has the goal of creating equal treatment for all and embracing the differences within people groups. In Far from the Tree, a novel written by Andrew Solomon, issues of identity are discussed regarding parents of children who society views as different, such as children with physical and mental disabilities, behavioral issues, learning disabilities, or extreme advancement at a young age. Solomon explains that identities can be either horizontal or vertical. Vertical identities are characteristics that individuals receive from their parents, such as their race, physical appearance, or personality traits. Horizontal traits come from outside or uncontrollable issues, such as the child having deviant or criminal behavior or having a learning disability. Solomon explains that children are often praised for exemplifying vertical identities but disregarded for displaying horizontal identities.

One chapter of the novel in particular discusses Down's syndrome, or DS, a horizontal identity, and the experiences of families as they navigate having to raise a child with the syndrome. Solomon tracks the viewpoint of society towards individuals with this particular

identity. People with Down's syndrome were once seen as "mongoloids" or "idiots." Children with Down's were unwanted in society and seen as incompetent or hopeless. Solomon writes that due to national recognition and education, society began to view mental issues as a whole in a different way and began to become more accepting of individuals with intellectual disabilities. These attitudes changed the way that society viewed individuals with Down's syndrome and individuals began to recognize the achievements and abilities of people with Down's. Efforts were begun to help intervene in the lives of children with DS, and mainstream efforts and inclusion efforts began to socialize people with Down's into every day life. Children with DS are included in public education classrooms with assisted help, and they are brought into mainstream society in numerous ways, one is through having a Special Olympics program that allows individuals with special needs to participate in popular sports.

Having Down's syndrome is just one example of an identity that should become normalized and recognized in society. Social justice calls for all people to recognize each person's value in reference to and regarding their personal identities. Although quite a broad concept, social justice is the constant seeking of equal or fair treatment for all people. In a large context, this calls for recognition of personal and institutionalized unfair treatment of people, which is likely due to the identities and characteristics humans assign to each other. For nearly all of history, race relationships have been far from exemplary of fair treatment for all and represents one of the largest battles involving identity. Social justice calls for the recognition of unfair treatment of various racial, ethnic, or nationality groups, and efforts to eradicate the root causes of these issues, whether they come from deep-rooted personal beliefs or social norms that are embedded into society.

A large discussion of social justice is based on the premise of what is fair and what is equal, and which approach should be taken in the pursuit of social justice. Personally, I believe that social justice should undertake a “fair” approach to reach the end goal of treating all people equally and allowing equal access to resources. Critics of social justice argue, “How can one claim equal treatment and equal access if some receive more help than others?” To address this, I believe that since all people are born differently, to different families, in different contexts, all people are at different starting points with achieving success. For the sake of the argument, success can be defined as the right to life and pursuit of happiness of people, meaning that basic needs are met, and the possibility of happiness is achievable. If people begin at different starting points, and live in widely different contexts, then different resources are needed for each of those people to achieve success.

For example, picture a first-grade classroom in any public school. Some of the students were fed a nutritious breakfast that morning, while others were only given a package of donuts. Some of the students did not eat breakfast at all. It is proven in child development studies, as well relatable from personal experience, that hunger affects the context in which a child can learn. Some of the students live with parents who have both received bachelor’s degrees. Others may be in families with a single-parent. Some of the students may live with grandparents who were never financially able to attend college. Although these children are all in the same classroom, their ability to learn is already affected by factors outside of the child’s control.

For an equal approach, all the children receive the same lecture by the same teacher leading the same activity for all the children to participate in. Nothing is inherently wrong with this approach. All the children are in an equal setting to learn. However, a fair approach would better equip each child for success. For sake of fairness, the children that needed breakfast would

be fed in their school cafeteria so that their hunger would not impede them from learning. Children of families with lower socioeconomic status would be provided additional assistance compared to their peers who may already be on appropriate reading levels. Not all the children are offered the extra help, and not all the children are offered breakfast. Equality's point of view would not approve of this approach. However, for the sake of the equal ability for all the children to achieve success, the fair approach equips each child by meeting their individual needs. Not all the children need to be served breakfast because some already ate. Not all the children need one-on-one intervention because some are performing on target. The fair approach here allows that the children, starting at various points, are equipped to reach the same end goal of success.

In a larger sense, social justice is the accommodation of people's needs based on a fair approach rather than an equal approach. Social justice calls for the recognition of injustices and the intentional effort put forth to improve the issue. This is either through efforts to alleviate the consequences of the injustices or to eradicate the sources of the injustices.

One issue in social justice that requires a "fair" approach is housing and the disproportionate access to adequate housing among impoverished populations. Evicted, written by Matthew Desmond, addresses current issues of access to adequate housing in Milwaukee, Wisconsin which are representative of nationwide trends in America. The novel also discusses poverty and the multiple factors that amplify and continue poverty among generations. In reference to the conflicting approaches within social justice, the fair approach proves more successful to this issue rather than an equal approach.

Desmond tracks several families who, having all come from different backgrounds, identity groups, and income levels, find themselves entrapped by Milwaukee's unequal access to housing. Many of the families are not able to buy homes or do not currently have the stability to

invest in a permanent home and are instead pushed to rent from landlords. The housing available is not given proper care, regardless of housing regulations, and does not provide ample living conditions to renters. The renters are not always able to pay their rent in full or on time due to a plethora of reasons both in and out of their control, and landlords are able to evict the renters through under-the-table practices and in turn pull more money from the occupants. The entire issue of housing and poverty is underscored by several other issues, which sheds light to how deep and intricate these social issues are. In contexts such as these, where housing is impacted by immeasurable outside factors, is a “one size fits all” approach realistic for addressing the unfair distribution of adequate housing? Logically, the answer is no. Deeply rooted issues that are affected by other problems cannot be fixed by an equal approach.

Instead, social justice calls for the recognition of the injustices at hand and efforts to combat them. Social justice is the approach for legislators and policy makers to give adequate housing vouchers to people in unsafe living conditions to alleviate the consequences of inadequate housing. Social justice is also the research into what keeps people groups in cyclical poverty and how to change unethical landlord practices. The goal is to not only alleviate the pain that the injustices cause, but also to address their root causes and fix issues from the source.

Since the goal of social justice is to actively seek out unfair treatment and address the issues to either alleviate those affected or eradicate the issue completely, awareness and education is essential. By enlightening populations of the evil truths of reality, and by shining light on hidden injustices, people become increasingly aware of social justice issues they had not recognized before. Social justice is not only seeking out issues in the world but understanding the relevance that these issues have to common audiences.

One activity that especially enlightened students taking the course, especially myself, was the “Slavery Footprint” activity. Through an interactive questionnaire of how many clothing items you own, sports equipment you use, the types of foods you stock the refrigerator with, and other seemingly irrelevant questions, the activity estimated the number of slaves working for each individual. Not that each of us students has personally hired any number of slaves, but that the things we eat, wear, and use have not come to us freely. Consumption in our society is reflective of workers elsewhere in the world receiving unfair wages and working in unsafe conditions to bring Americans the things we use every day.

Social justice is the need for increased awareness of all people towards the issues that individuals may directly or indirectly play a role. Social justice seekers should never be comfortable in the progress made but always search for how to best understand various issues and address them, as well as educate others along the way. Social justice is a group effort, and the goals can only be achieved through team efforts.

In my personal experience, social justice has a real context in my own community. For one, my home church has recently undergone several weeks of study of racial issues in America and particularly in Little Rock. My church has organized an educational approach with other churches and members of the community, those that have been directly affected by race relations, I might add, that give real insight and experience of acts of racism within our community. The point of the series was to address that racism is not something that happened a long time ago, or that it is something that is present but not in our own community. The series educates the audience that racism is active in our own community in ways that are not always realized, especially by majority groups who do not face discrimination. In reference to social

justice, the series sheds light on a particular issue that most of the church-goers would not understand otherwise. It is educating those involved on root causes of the issue.

Secondly, my volunteer experience at my previous school has given insight to social justice issues. By following along with the news, education became a hot topic in Little Rock earlier this year with the state of Arkansas working to gain control over the Little Rock School District. The issue was that these particular schools were not performing well, and the state did not want local control for the schools. By attending eStem, a public charter school, and volunteering there now as a college student, I see how families are affected by educational issues in my own community. My school serves to be a place for fair treatment and equal access to education for its students, and I saw the importance of that goal during Little Rock's education crisis.

Lastly, as a female student at Ouachita, I am part of the Pruet Sisterhood, which is a club for female Christian Studies majors and other women who feel called to ministry. The club was created to provide a supportive environment for females in ministry, which is a male-dominated field. This dilemma is representative of a larger issue within social justice which is the discrimination against women in workplaces. Although my experience is in a religious context, the concept of social justice is still relevant in that it is an active effort to alleviate the consequences that may be caused by discrimination in a male dominated field.

The course as a whole has enlightened me on the idea of social justice and the immeasurable depth of all it entails. My personal experiences have given realistic contexts to issues within social justice, and due to the awareness and ability to seek out injustices in society, I hope that I will continue to gain knowledge of issues surrounding me and learn how to best address them in the context of social justice.

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